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VALUE VS. TRUTH AS THE CRITERION IN THE TEACHING OF COLLEGE PHILOSOPHY

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The teacher of philosophy tends to be so exclusively a system-builder, with an eye single to the logical construction of his philosophy, that the concrete, human needs of his students are apt to be lost sight of. In general educational theory there is taking place a reform of method, and a reaction against the mere teaching of subject-matter regardless of the interests, aptitudes, and needs of the pupils. Teachers formerly taught subjects of study; now they teach children. The lesson learned from the elementary schools, that teaching should be ordered to fit the psychological needs of the pupils rather than the logical claims of the subject-matter, may with profit be extended to the teaching of philosophy to college undergraduates.

The vast majority of individuals never become students of metaphysics in any technical sense of the term. Of those who study philosophy in college, many simply "take courses", for sundry reasons, without ever acquiring much interest in the subject. With a large number of the students who really become interested in philosophy, religious doubt is the beginning of a philosophical interest that arises in the attempt to bolster up a waning faith. Metaphysical interests arise in others as a direct outgrowth of the developing sex life in early adolescence, as in the case of Don Juan, who—

"Did the best he could
With things not very subject to control,
And turned, without perceiving his condition,
Like Coleridge, into a metaphysician.

"He thought about himself, and the whole earth,
Of man the wonderful, and of the stars,
And how the deuce they ever could have birth."¹

As the poet says, with true Freudian insight, "puberty assisted" in bringing about Don Juan's philosophical interests.

Mere intellectual curiosity, or the pure love of wisdom for its own sake, is a possible though negligible cause of a

¹ Byron: "Don Juan," xci, xcii.

student's interest in philosophy, at least at the beginning of his studies. As a general rule, philosophy is valued at first only as an aid in solving the fundamental problems of life, and not as an end in itself. With prolonged study, perhaps unfortunately, philosophy may become an end in itself, divorced from all practical problems of life, through a psychological process like that involved in the case of the man who took his first drink to save his life, and thereafter lived to drink.

"Longings sublime and aspirations high" come naturally enough during adolescence, and the instruction of college undergraduates should have due regard to the moral needs of the students. College students of philosophy desire little philosophic dogmatizing from instructors, but, on the contrary, a free field in which to draw their own conclusions. The trend of their speculations can be guided, however, if instruction is insinuated gently, and not applied bluntly. Since metaphysics is a subject on which the most learned of doctors disagree violently, disciples are free, to a large extent, to choose metaphysical conclusions,—such, at least, as are really relevant to human concerns, upon the basis of value, regardless of truth. The question thus presents itself as to the sort of philosophic beliefs that are most valuable for students. This problem is similar to the problem of the value of religious beliefs.

Whatever may be the latest philosophic conclusions of a teacher of metaphysics, they are usually not the same as his earliest conclusions. The failure of a man's metaphysical views to broaden and grow with continued study would be an indication of intellectual stagnation. In every special science, at least some few results are established, and accepted by all scientists without question. Such results have become fixed in the elementary text-books. But metaphysics is a different matter. There is no generally accepted text-book of metaphysics. When it is the case that the teacher of philosophy has come to have somewhat different philosophic views from the ones that he held when he was a younger student, as is the normal case, he is very likely to infer from this, if his attention is called to the matter, that his own students will not at first acquire philosophic truths in final form. Even if there be final and absolute Truth in metaphysics, the human acquisition of this Truth is a psychological process, always incomplete and always imperfect. The teacher of philosophy, as a teacher, should be primarily concerned, not with absolute Truth, its existence being granted for the sake of argument, but with the psychological learning processes of his students in

their acceptance of some views and rejection of others, for emotional as well as for logical reasons. The student believes that his conclusions are reached by purely intellectual processes, but the educational psychologist recognizes that the passionate nature is a large factor in the process.

Since human nature is such as it is, idealistic systems of philosophy, whether true or not, will always appeal to students of philosophy, and will be accepted by many for the reason that man's emotional nature, in so many cases, requires some sort of idealistic beliefs about reality. As James says, man's "will to believe" will assert itself in a large percentage of cases, and will accept an idealistic view of things because such a view is congruent with certain vital needs. Whether or not many of the current systems of philosophy that are called idealistic really offer support to man's specific religious beliefs,—even the most general and fundamental of them, is a question that need not be raised. They at least *seem* to most students to do so,—to offer a refuge of respectable supernaturalism against the encroachments of scientific naturalism. Upon the basis of value, and regardless of objective truth, the teaching of the great historical systems of idealism is certainly justifiable.² To force upon students a completely naturalistic philosophy, even if such were the true philosophy, —a philosophy that proclaims the universe to be essentially indifferent to the ideals of man, would be extremely disintegrating, especially for those adolescents who were glowing with the enthusiasm of new moral aspirations. Naturalistic beliefs would crush out the incentive to noble effort. But belief in idealistic philosophies, with their appearance of devoutness, however vague, lends grandeur to the universe, and zest to the moral urgings of the individual life. Several students of my acquaintance, now graduate students in philosophy and in other departments at Harvard, have told me that, while not now calling themselves metaphysical idealists, they nevertheless gained moral support and stability of character through studying, when undergraduates, such sympathetic treatments of idealism in its modern historical forms as are found in some of the chapters of Royce's *Spirit of Modern Philosophy*. This is, I think, a not uncommon experience. It is reported³ that Jowett encouraged the study of the philosophy of T. H. Green by Balliol undergraduates because of its religious value for the students who were in search of a substitute for their earlier religious beliefs.

² Cf. G. Stanley Hall: *Adolescence*, vol. ii, p. 551.

Cf. F. C. S. Schiller: *Studies in Humanism*, pp. 278, 79.

Moral idealism is *theoretically* independent of any particular religion or system of metaphysics. It can be established to the full satisfaction of the intellect along with a naturalistic metaphysic as well as with an idealistic one. But *practically*, for actual human beings, most of whom, fortunately, are very incompletely intellectualized and de-emotionalized, theoretical moral idealism can become embodied in actual conduct only through the instrumentality of religious and idealistic beliefs. Belief in God and immortality, for example, tends to moralize the whole life, and to support such forms of conduct as are judged by the theorist to be right. The ethical theorist is concerned with discovering *what is right*. The preacher is concerned with influencing the will of man *to do the right*, that is, with making man's conduct conform to the standards set up by the theorist. Similarly the teacher of philosophy has a mission to perform in offering to youthful students such philosophic beliefs as will encourage, not discourage, moral effort on their part.

The educational psychologist would prescribe the early studies in philosophy upon the basis of their psychological adequacy, and their emotional congruity with the requirements of the moral life. A sympathetic presentation of the idealistic philosophies of history, with a greater effort at exposition than at criticism, has valuable results, while the exclusive teaching of naturalistic views would have disastrous moral effects. Perfect intellectual honesty and candor on the part of the instructor can be united with a due regard for the values of the metaphysical views that are incorporated in the various idealistic philosophies in history.